

Testimony

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**Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Hearing on H.R. 503, a bill to amend the Horse Protection Act**

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Chairman Goodlatte and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Dr. Tom Lenz, from Louisburg, Kansas, and I have been an equine veterinarian for over 30 years. I am not only a horse veterinarian, but an avid horseman who has owned and enjoyed horses my entire life.

My official role today is as past president of the American Association of Equine Practitioners and the current chairman of the AAEP's Equine Welfare Committee. The AAEP is a professional association that represents more than 9,000 equine veterinarians and veterinary students worldwide with a mission of protecting the health and welfare of the horse. In addition to serving as chairman of the association's Equine Welfare Committee, I also serve on the welfare advisory committees of the American Veterinary Medical Association, the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, and the American Horse Council.

I am here today to explain to the Committee why the majority of horse veterinarians in this country oppose H.R. 503. My two key points today are the following:

- First, this bill will negatively impact the health and welfare of horses across the country, and offers no solution to the current problem of what to do with horses that are no longer needed or useful to their owners.
- Second, horses processed at U.S.D.A.-regulated facilities under the supervision of federal veterinarians are treated with dignity and euthanized humanely.

In 2005, according to U.S.D.A. statistics, nearly 100,000 U.S. horses were sent to processing plants in the United States, Canada and Mexico. The vast majority of those horses were no longer useful or of value to their owners - they were unwanted. A horse can become unwanted because it has failed to meet its owners expectations because of old age, poor performance or lameness; it may be dangerous and present a risk to its handlers; or its owners may no longer be capable of providing physical or financial care. These are usually the lowest valued horses in the industry and bring only a few hundred dollars at sale compared to the national average selling price for a horse of \$3,100. An animal that is unwanted becomes at risk for neglect and abuse, whether intentional or not.

One of the most detrimental aspects of H.R. 503, from an equine welfare standpoint, is the bill's failure to address how and where unwanted horses will be cared for if horse processing is banned. If H.R. 503 is passed, nearly 100,000 horses next year will need to be placed in alternative homes, or be euthanized and their carcasses disposed of. And that number will repeat each year, as additional horses grow old, encounter health problems, or are no longer wanted. There are a number of equine rescue and retirement facilities in the U.S. providing homes for old and unwanted horses, and we commend their work. However, the capacity of these individual facilities is usually limited to 30 horses or less. We estimate that current rescue/retirement facilities in the U.S. can handle no more than 6,000 horses per year. What will happen to the rest? Based on the number of unwanted horses that would need placement after a processing ban, there are clearly not enough volunteers or placement opportunities available to meet the dramatic increase in horses requiring permanent care that H.R. 503 will create. Most local humane shelters do not possess the funding, infrastructure, or facilities to rescue and house neglected or abandoned horses.

Additionally, H.R. 503 does not address the funding required to care for or dispose of an additional 100,000 horses per year. Assuming a bare minimum care cost of \$5 per day for a horse's basic needs, not including veterinary or farrier expenses, the funding needed per year, per horse, is approximately \$1,825. That translates to around 180 million dollars to care for these animals next year or nearly 20 million dollars to euthanize and dispose of their carcasses.

And that cost will increase incrementally each year as additional horses become old or unwanted. H.R. 503 offers no solutions for where the money will come from to defray these costs. Inadequate funding creates inadequate care, which is a significant welfare concern for these horses.

A final welfare concern for these horses is the fact that a ban on horse processing in the United States does not mean a ban on horse processing in our neighboring countries. H.R. 503 does nothing to prevent U.S. horses from being shipped out of the country and ultimately to a processing facility. The shipment of U.S. horses to foreign countries presents a number of serious welfare concerns. Horses will be on transport vehicles for much longer periods of time traveling to foreign destination points without the protection of APHIS oversight. More importantly, USDA humane transport to slaughter regulations and oversight do not apply to foreign plants. Nor will USDA veterinarians be on site at the foreign plants to ensure proper handling of the horses and their humane euthanasia.

With a lack of adequate placement opportunities, no funding for long-term care and no mechanism to stop the transport of horses outside the U.S. to processing plants in other countries, H.R. 503 will increase the suffering of American horses, not stop it. Many horse owners, unable to sell their low-value horses, will neglect, abuse or abandon them.

My second point is that horse processing at a U.S.D.A.-regulated facility is a humane, painless method of euthanasia for the horse. In July of 2002, several members of the AAEP leadership, including myself, visited the Beltex plant in Texas to view the euthanasia process firsthand. Two U.S.D.A. veterinarians were on-site to inspect the horses following transport, their transportation/health documents, and to oversee the humane treatment of the animals throughout the process. During our visit, we witnessed a professionally run operation that treated horses with dignity and euthanized them humanely. The horses were handled calmly and were neither frightened nor abused as depicted on videos provided by proponents of this bill. In addition, brand inspectors were present when horses were unloaded to ensure that none of them had been stolen.

The euthanasia method that is used at the processing facilities is captive bolt, which renders the animal instantaneously unconscious and brain dead. The American Veterinary Medical Association's Panel on Euthanasia deemed this as one of the two preferred humane forms of euthanasia for a horse. I know Dr. Bonnie Beaver of the American Veterinary Medical Association will address the process of captive bolt euthanasia for the Committee, so I will not expand upon the process. However, I want to stress to the Committee that if a horse owner is unable or unwilling to provide adequate care for their horse, humane euthanasia by captive bolt at a U.S.D.A.-regulated facility is an acceptable alternative to a life of suffering, inadequate care or abandonment.

In closing, I want to state that the AAEP does not favor processing as a way of dealing with the unwanted horses, but is an acceptable option until the horse industry can develop an effective plan for dealing with horses that are no longer useful or wanted. We believe that the equine industry must work together to help these animals through education and encouraging responsible horse ownership. That is why the Unwanted Horse Coalition was formed in 2005 by the AAEP, and is now operating as part of the American Horse Council to address and resolve the problem of what to do with horses that are no longer useful or wanted. Society has been working on solving a similar problem with dogs and cats for years and yet we still euthanize nearly 3 million animals each year at humane shelter. Solving this issue in the horse will take time, but the industry has deemed it a priority and is working to solve it. That is why it is premature to ban the humane euthanasia of horses at a processing facility. H.R. 503 will compound the problems of unwanted horses by banning one of the current mechanisms to humanely remove these horses from the horse population. Most of the people supporting this bill are well intentioned, but ill informed about the consequences of this legislation. They are motivated by emotion and not fact. We, the horse veterinarians of this country, are on the front line in reducing pain and suffering in our horses and we know that passage of this bill will offer no solutions to the problem of the unwanted horses, but will in fact create more welfare problems. This bill will have a serious negative effect on the health and welfare of tens of thousands of horses in the United States. Thank you

